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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 YEREVAN 000282

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [TU](#) [AJ](#) [AM](#)
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR URGES OPPOSITION LEADER NOT TO
UNDERMINE PEACE PROCESSES FOR POLITICAL GAIN

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Classified By: AMB. Marie L. Yovanovitch, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Ambassador called on former President Levon Ter-Petrossian April 22 to deliver two messages: 1) that LTP should act as a patriot and not undermine recent progress in Turkish-Armenian relations for short-term political ends, and 2) to urge LTP, going into the Yerevan election, to do his part to avoid a repeat of March 1, 2008, violence. LTP offered a meandering monologue with several key points: he has always supported pragmatic solutions to Turkey and Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) issues; Sargsian's weak hand and poor negotiating leave Armenia worse off and unable to implement a deal; Turkey will never open the border until there's been an NK settlement; his Armenian National Congress will grow stronger as the government likely will steal the upcoming election. LTP confided that he had had secret talks with authorities, but that Sargsian had abused the slack the opposition had given him, and misinterpreted forbearance as weakness. Thus, the ANC must now show a tougher side. Nonetheless, the ANC's public reaction so far to the April 23 joint Armenia-Turkey-Switzerland communique was a relatively mild demand for the agreed "roadmap" to be made public for open debate. END SUMMARY

¶2. (C) DO NO HARM: Ambassador called on LTP April 22 with the goal of emphasizing to LTP the genuine progress and importance of Armenia's bid to normalize relations with Turkey, and to urge LTP's Armenian National Congress to take the high road and not seek to pull the deal apart and thereby undermine Armenia's national interests. She also urged LTP to avoid any mistakes or provocations which might make more likely a repeat of last year's political violence. Ambassador was able to deliver these messages only after listening to a 45-minute soliloquy of LTP's views of the current situation. LTP was joined by ANC Coordinator (and his former presidential spokesman) Levon Zurabian, and by his longtime executive assistance Avetis Avakian, while the Ambassador was accompanied by polchief.

¶3. (C) THE IMPORTANCE OF TURKEY AND NK: LTP affirmed that he has always favored normalization with Turkey and a peaceful negotiated solution to Nagorno Karabakh. He contended that the deals he had nearly reached in 1998 -- at which time he was ousted and called a traitor by cabinet colleagues including the current President Serzh Sargsian -- were much better deals for Armenian interests than the arrangements that Serzh Sargsian is negotiating now. LTP argued that there is no chance that Turkey will open the border with Armenia before a peace settlement is reached with Azerbaijan over NK, and any hope of such separation is a mirage. LTP lamented that the United States had not, in his view, placed a high enough priority or enough political heft behind efforts to resolve the NK and Turkey issues before now. LTP argued that the best way to make progress with

Turkey is to set the issue of "genocide" off to one side and simply agree to disagree with Turkey on it. He contended that his successor, President Kocharian had introduced "genocide" recognition as a priority of Armenian foreign policy and this was a big mistake. Further, he argued that Sargsian had erred in offering to set up a bilateral historical commission with Turkey to explore the "genocide" issue, a move he said is completely unacceptable to Armenia. He argued that the "genocide" recognition campaign should be left to the Diaspora: "it is their work," he commented.

14. (C) ANC'S RESTRAINT ABUSED: LTP confided that he had had secret back-channel communications with authorities -- once directly and other times through the mediation of European officials. LTP complained that Sargsian had broken off the back-channel contacts two months ago, and have given the ANC nothing in return for its moderation these past months. Fifty-five ANC political figures remain jailed, he said, while pro-opposition businesses faced "tax terror" and ANC activists attempting their nightly "political promenade" demonstrations are routinely hauled off to police stations. Moreover, he said, the U.S. and European leaders allowed Sargsian to get away with this anti-democratic pressure, not wanting to apply pressure to Sargsian when he seemed to be making progress on NK and Turkey. Sargsian had mistaken the ANC's "soft" activities as weakness, and this was a mistake. LTP implied that now ANC must demonstrate to Sargsian his error on this, and therefore criticism will become very harsh on Turkey, Nagorno-Karabakh, and social issues.

15. (C) HANDICAPPING THE ELECTION: LTP commented that there are two ways that the upcoming Yerevan elections could go. First, which he deemed unlikely, is that Sargsian could allow a genuinely free and fair election, which the ANC would handily win. Such a result would build Sargsian's democratic

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legitimacy, as the public and international community realized that he had allowed the opposition to win fairly. What LTP expected instead is that Sargsian will pull out every dirty trick to steal the Yerevan election. Appointing "that bandit Gagik Beglarian" as mayor in the run-up to the mayoral election was proof that the ruling party plans bad faith, he said. In that case, the ANC-led opposition will again lead mass protests, as last year. LTP was unsure if Sargsian would have the stomach to repeat Kocharian's use of force to disperse the peaceful protesters. LTP pledged that for the opposition's part, everything would be completely peaceful.

16. (C) CALLING ON LTP'S BETTER ANGELS: The Ambassador then delivered her two messages, first that LTP must resist the urge to sabotage what is a good deal in Armenia's long-term national interests on Turkish rapprochement. Second, she commented that violence such as occurred just over a year ago is normally the result of mistakes on both sides of the divide, and she urged LTP to use all caution to avoid making any provocative steps or miscalculations -- aside from normal political campaigning -- that might increase the chances for violent conflict in connection with the election. She noted that in any country the main burden is on the government to maintain peace and public order, and the government bears the heaviest blame if that order degenerates into violence. However the opposition also bears its share of responsibility for behaving legitimately and peacefully. LTP reacted defensively by insisting that his side had never broken a single law during all the political travails over the past 18 months, while the government has violated fundamental rights with impunity. The Ambassador reaffirmed that the United States continues to push the GOAM hard on the need to release the ANC supporters from prison and to meet its other lagging democracy/human rights commitments. LTP assured that the ANC "will do nothing harmful to Armenia's interests" whether on foreign policy issues or domestic political activity.

17. (C) DRIVING HOME THE MESSAGE: On April 23, the joint

communiqué was released by the governments of Armenia, Turkey, and Switzerland disclosing that a roadmap for normalization had been agreed upon. In the wake of that release, Polchief telephoned ANC Coordinator Levon Zurabian to reiterate the ambassador's point that it would be most unfortunate for the ANC to sacrifice Armenia's long-term national interest in achieving normal relations with Turkey out of short-term political gamesmanship. Polchief also observed that U.S. officials at the highest levels of the White House and State Department had personally engaged in support of the Swiss-mediated talks between Armenian and Turkey, and would likely be chagrined if the deal were to unravel because of crass political point-scoring from the opposition in Yerevan. Zurabian took that point thoughtfully on board, even while complaining again about the pressures the ANC leadership is under while so many of its supporters remain jailed.

COMMENT

18. (C) Our expectation is that the GOAM probably will indeed deploy the full range of administrative resources and dirty tricks necessary to win the Yerevan elections in the opposition's strongest bastion of political support. We can sympathize to a certain extent with the ANC's frustration that the government has paid little price for its continuing violation of the opposition's political rights, and that the ANC's popular support seems to have waned considerably after a year of seeming impotence. LTP's support during the 2008 cycle was never based on widespread public esteem, but rather on the calculation that LTP was a wily, battle-scarred old fox who could succeed where more innocent opposition leaders had failed in bringing down the entrenched Kocharian-Sargsian power structure. This perception, obviously, has taken a beating after a year with nothing to show.

19. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: As it grows more desperate, it is entirely possible that the ANC might abandon LTP's longstanding moderate position on Turkey and NK and hope to use nationalist demagoguery as a club to beat up President Sargsian. This, of course, is precisely the same tactic -- and the same issue -- that Sargsian and his allies exploited to hound LTP from the presidency in 1998, making the prospect of turning the tables back on Sargsian all the more tempting to LTP. Our sense is that while all these grievances and seeming injustices roil LTP and his allies no end, LTP also recognizes that an open border and rapprochement with Turkey is in Armenia's greater interest. For now, he rationalizes that Sargsian cannot possibly succeed, and thus his criticism

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of the process will do no real harm. We hope, however, to have won a little more ANC restraint on this issue through our intervention by letting LTP's know that this deal is real, imminent, and fragile. We will see if he is ultimately more minded to act as a statesman or to pursue his political agenda at any cost.

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